

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

(i) *The plea* is for yet another series, to be produced while the present series goes on, designed for those who are newly literate or very badly educated. There are multitudes on the fringe of Christianity, or recently baptized who could not compass the reading of these books. They have an urgent claim on the attention and care of the Church. I realize that Bishop Neill and his very small staff are hard pressed. I realize that those who could write such simple books as I have in mind are few and far between. But I believe the need is urgent and immediate.

(ii) *Some suggestions.* *World Christian Books* is one of the exciting, creative acts of the Christian Church in this century. Those of us who are alive to the demands of evangelistic educational work at home and overseas ought to line up behind those responsible for this work and see that, so far from allowing it to go by default, we assure its increasing success. What can we do? I would suggest four things :

- (a) *Pray.* This is a work with vast potentialities for good, and indeed (if it were to be mishandled) for ill. The editor, the writers, the translators, the business agents, all need the prayers of the Church.
- (b) See that these books are on the bookstall of your own Church and well known among your Church people.
- (c) See that your local public library knows about these books and takes them.
- (d) See that the missionaries who have gone from your Church get a copy of each book as it comes out. This might well be a gift from the Church to them; and the offer to provide more copies as needed on the field would be very welcome.

The publishers and distributors of *World Christian Books* are the United Society for Christian Literature, 4 Bouverie Street, London, E.C.4.

The Theology of Baptism

BY THE REV. MARTIN PARSONS, M.A.¹

I BEGIN with a quotation which I think will receive universal agreement. It is from Donald Baillie's lecture on baptism in the book, *The Theology of the Sacraments*, edited after his death by his brother, and containing a charming biographical memoir. He says : " Those who are entrusted with the care of souls in the pastoral ministry must frequently ask themselves with some misgivings what the sacrament of baptism means to the main mass of Church people who bring their children to be baptized. But, indeed, a great many ministers must sometimes feel that they themselves have more questions to ask about the meaning of baptism than they are able to answer, and that they are thus not very well equipped to give clear and sound guidance to their people as to what they should believe about this

¹ A paper read to the London Diocesan Union of Evangelical Clergy.

sacrament of the Church. Moreover, if they turn to the theologians for guidance, they may find among these also a good deal of confusion ; and certainly they will find very lively discussion." And a little further on he says, " I believe that a great deal of light can be thrown, and indeed has been thrown, on these questions by a return to the study of the New Testament."

Since my subject is " The Theology of Baptism," and not " Modern Pastoral Practice in regard to Baptism," I intend to study it from the standpoint of Holy Scripture. I acknowledge my debt to W. F. Flemington, *The New Testament Doctrine of Baptism*, which may be taken as the standard modern work on the subject. In passing, we note with interest that Flemington, and Oscar Cullman who wrote *Baptism in the New Testament* for the S.C.M. Book Club, and Donald Baillie, are none of them Anglicans, but all come down heavily on the side of infant baptism.

In considering Baptism in the New Testament we cannot ignore the baptism of John. All the four Gospels mention it and Jesus Himself submitted to it in order to fulfil all righteousness. It was a baptism of repentance unto remission of sins. But John is clear that his ministry is only preparing the way for the ministry of Christ. " I baptize with water. He shall baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

Can we regard John's baptism as merely an intensification of proselyte baptism as practised by the Jews? Surely not. It is true that in both cases baptism in water, probably by immersion, signified a new beginning and initiation into a new community. But there the similarity ends. John's baptism was accepted mainly by Jews, those who were already within the People of the Covenant. It involved, therefore, not just a *change of status*, but a *moral reformation*. There had to be a confession of sins. Gentiles, who desired to embrace the religion of Israel, had the ceremonial washing of baptism. But in the case of John's baptism, Jews, who were not living as the People of God should, underwent a moral cleansing through repentance and so entered—in some sense at least—the Kingdom of God.

It is on the whole better to view the baptism of John, not as a specific application of proselyte baptism, but rather as the culmination of the Word of the Prophets. Jesus so identified Himself with those He came to save that He accepted the baptism of John, though not without a protest from the latter. And at the baptism the Holy Spirit came upon our Lord in visible form, and the voice of the Father was heard to say, " Thou art My beloved Son." It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that there is a connection between this incident and the later truth that baptism is linked with the receiving of the Holy Spirit and adoption to be sons of God. Karl Barth, as quoted by Professor Baillie, says that this is really how Jesus instituted the sacrament of baptism.

The only occasions on which our Lord speaks of baptism which He Himself is to receive are Luke xii. 50, " I have a baptism to be baptized with ; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished"; and Mark x. 38, " Can you . . . be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized ? " The reference is clearly to His coming passion. The use of the word " baptism " might be no more than an extension of such

Old Testament phraseology as "When thou passest through the waters . . .", "I am come into deep waters." But are we right to dismiss it so easily? Surely the constant linking of baptism with the death of Christ in the Epistles can find its origin in these sayings of our Lord.

I think we can see the origin of Christian baptism not merely in the command of Matt. xxviii. 19, but in the whole ministry of Jesus. He was baptized by John. He allowed His disciples to baptize even larger numbers than John had, though it was evidently the equivalent of John's baptism (John iv. 1). And He spoke of His approaching death as a baptism. Flemington aptly says: "Such a reference becomes full of meaning if we recognize that it is a matter of history that the death of Jesus and the subsequent belief in His resurrection did in fact mark the inauguration of His wider 'ministry' in the world at large, as surely as the baptism in the River Jordan inaugurated His ministry in Palestine."

When you come to the practice of the Early Church as recorded in the Acts it is difficult to find a single pattern. I doubt if we can establish our belief about baptism and confirmation from that alone, any more than we can find there the threefold order of the ministry. For instance, at the very beginning of the Acts our Lord, just before His Ascension, contrasted the water baptism of John with the Spirit baptism which they should receive. There is nothing in those words to suggest the Christian rite of baptism with water. We might expect Peter's words at the close of his Pentecostal sermon to represent the norm: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." Yet in the case of Cornelius and his fellow-hearers, the Holy Ghost fell on them before they were baptized.

The case of the disciples at Ephesus is different again. They had received John's baptism but knew nothing of the Holy Spirit. After Paul's explanation they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus, but only after confirmation did they receive the Holy Ghost. Saul's own experience had been the reverse. Ananias laid his hands upon him and he received his sight and (as I read it) was filled with the Holy Ghost. After that he was baptized. What happened after the preaching of Philip in Samaria is the nearest to the order which we now take for granted: faith, baptism, confirmation, receiving of the Spirit. Can we even be certain that everyone who had received John's baptism (e.g. the Apostles) was baptized with water again? Was the baptism of the Spirit all that mattered? I think a study of the Acts leads us to the conclusion of Dr. Silva New, as quoted by Flemington: "Belief in Jesus (or in His Name), baptism, the remission of sins, the laying on of Apostolic hands, and the reception of the Spirit, seem to have formed a single complex of associated ideas, any one of which might in any single narrative be either omitted or emphasized."

Flemington says that baptism outwardly embodied the meaning and essence of the Gospel, and shows us the position in the Acts in these words: "The convert could appropriate that meaning for himself by undergoing baptism. Sometimes that meaning was so

profound that the baptismal rite could actually serve as the occasion for the convert's reception of that distinctive Christian endowment which the early Church called the gift of the Spirit. At other times, and it would seem increasingly as time went on, that gift of the Spirit became associated not directly with the original rite of baptism but with a second rite, that of the laying on of hands, often united with the first, but sometimes separated from it. For the overwhelming majority of early disciples this outward embodiment of the Gospel was normal and necessary. With modern examples from the mission field to help us to understand what baptism may mean to a convert to-day, we need not doubt that for countless first-century Christians, as for their Master, at the moment of baptism the heavens were opened. Here and there, however, there were those who entered into the fullest Christian experience without the aid of any mediating sign. Such examples need provide a cause of wonder only to those who fail to allow for the working of the principle, *Deus non alligatur sacramentis suis.*"

When you come to the Pauline Epistles you find a developed theology of baptism. That he regarded it as essential cannot be doubted. His words, "For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the Gospel," are no disparagement of the sacrament. He was horrified at the formation of a Paul party. His vehement, "Was Paul crucified for you? or were you baptized into the name of Paul?" heightens the meaning of baptism. It is the personal application of the atoning work of Christ. This is brought out in the greatest of all the baptismal passages, Romans vi, which some of us may feel would be a better reading for the Baptism Service, at any rate than John iii in the Service for those of Riper Years.

"How shall we who *died* to sin still live in it?" Note the tense—"died", once for all. And in expounding this further Paul at once refers to baptism. "He who has been baptized into Christ has thereby been received into a real fellowship of death and life with Him" (Nygren). We who were once "in Adam" are now through baptism incorporated into Christ. And since we are members of the body of Christ, by one Spirit baptized into one body, what is true of Christ is true also of us. We have died, been buried, and risen again to walk in newness of life. This *is* true of those who are in Christ. It is an objective fact, not a subjective experience. On this let me quote Nygren again, for I think what he says is very important. "There is no idea at all of a mystical experience of unity. Such a concept belongs to a thought-world quite different from Paul's. Nor is the meaning that the Christian immerses himself in contemplation of the death and resurrection of Christ, until he is so at one with them that he knows Christ's death as his own and Christ's resurrection as his also. So to understand Paul is to misunderstand him. The truth is not that, through some endeavour on our part, Christ, and that which happened to Him, are to be introduced into our lives. The truth is rather that, by God's action, we are included in and made sharers of that which befell Christ. That of which Paul speaks is a simple and unmythical reality. God has made Christ the head of a new humanity; and into that new organic relationship he has brought us through baptism." Sound Lutheran theology!

The argument of Romans vi is that to be *in Christ* effects a real moral change. Similarly, in 1 Cor. vi. 11, after enumerating a perfectly appalling list of evil-doers, Paul says, "And such were some of you : but ye were washed, but ye were sanctified, but ye were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God." I think it quite unrealistic to reject all possible reference to baptism here. Every idea expressed is one associated with baptism elsewhere, particularly the name of the Lord Jesus, and the gift of the Spirit. A reference to St. Paul's account of his conversion in Acts xxii. 16 ought to be decisive : "Arise and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the Name of the Lord."

Dying and rising with Christ, cleansing and washing away of sins, are but two aspects of the same thing. (And, incidentally, if the language of Romans vi seems to favour total immersion, the language about cleansing is certainly reminiscent of such Old Testament passages as Ezek. xxxvi. 25, "I will *sprinkle* clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean".) And all other ways of expressing the effects of baptism are but different aspects of the one mighty fact of being *in Christ*. "As many of you as were baptized into Christ did put on Christ" (Gal. iii. 27). "Baptized into one body" (I Cor. xii. 13). And so on. Baptism to St. Paul is the great act of initiation into Christ and therefore into His Church. This crisis of entering in was not a subjective experience, but something "*given*"; a part of the truth to be believed. "One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Eph. iv. 5).

There is not time to go even cursorily into the writings of St. John and the other New Testament writers. Suffice it to say that St. John is only supplementing St. Paul when he lays stress on the new birth and divine sonship. These are aspects of the gift of the Spirit. When you study the marks of those who are born again in I John you cannot avoid the impression that the new birth is a tremendous spiritual upheaval, and that unless there are indications of liveliness we have no right to assume the presence of life. In all that the New Testament says about baptism—and I hope we are convinced that it makes stupendous claims for it—we must assume that it speaks of baptism *rightly received*.

The connection of repentance with baptism was something which the Church received from John the Baptist. Peter stressed it from the very first. "Repent, and be baptized." Also with remarkable consistency in the Acts baptism is linked with hearing the word and with faith. "They that received his word were baptized." "Philip preached unto him Jesus" and he was baptized. "Lydia heard us : whose heart the Lord opened to give heed to the things which were spoken by Paul. And when she was baptized . . ." (xvi. 14, 15). These are but a few examples. Repentance, hearing the truth, faith, obedience—these accompanied the outward act of baptism which initiated the convert into Christ and sealed to him all the benefits of the saving acts of God. Baptism was God's act, and it was this that brought salvation. "By grace . . . *through* faith." All the faith in the world would not avail without the grace.

Flemington sums up thus : "In all these New Testament writings

Christian baptism is a *rite with a meaning*. The outward act of water baptism recalls, and as it were *re-presents*, that act of God done once for all for man's salvation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Baptism thus implements that act for each successive believer. It has an outward and an inward aspect which may be separated in thought. The evidence of the New Testament, however, shows that such separation was far less obvious and natural for the early Christians than it is for us. It cannot be without significance that there is no passage in the New Testament which makes any ultimate separation between the outward rite of baptism and the spiritual reality which the rite embodied. Both the act and the meaning of the act mattered—the two formed for the first Christians an indivisible unity." Flemington adds a footnote which raises the question which is in all minds: "Some separation of these aspects is inevitable for us, because the normal practice of most Christian communions to-day is to baptize infants rather than adults."

We are all familiar with the controversy and many of the arguments on both sides. Our young people are facing the problem as we did in our earlier days. The arguments of Ryle and Griffith Thomas are still useful, as well as innumerable pamphlets on the subject. Flemington has an excellent final chapter on Infant Baptism in which he marshals many of the old arguments. I should, however, like to attempt to summarize the line taken by Donald Baillie in the lecture from which I quoted at the beginning. He cites Wheeler Robinson, as a Baptist, saying, "Baptism is the door of entrance to the Church." Certainly. Are the children of Christians to be regarded as having a place within the Church of Christ, or are they outsiders? The question boils down to this: Is there such a thing as a Christian child? Are children in no sense Christian till they have had a conversion experience? If so, what comes of children's worship, or teaching a child to pray? There seems no meaning in our Lord's quotation: "Have ye never read, Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou has perfected praise?"

It is God's will that children should have such an experience of His grace and love as befits their stage of growth: that they should be *Christian children*. Therefore they are part of the Church, admitted by baptism. And if it be objected that, though children may have a real faith, unconscious infants cannot, Baillie has this answer: "A newborn child is the beginning of an immortal soul, but is not yet an independent soul. Decisions have to be made for him, by his parents and by the Church, and these cannot be postponed, because life goes on and the child grows up in one way or another. So the Christian Church and Christian parents will choose the Christian life for their children. Does this mean that the benefits of the sacrament come to the child in response to the faith of the parents and of the Church? Yes, indeed: that is just what it means. They claim God's promise for the child by faith. And that is just as it ought to be, and is in keeping with the whole outlook of the New Testament, which has none of our false individualism." "The New Israel did not ignore the family any more than the old did," says Baillie.

What difference, then, does baptism make to an unconscious infant?

It brings the child into a new environment, the Church of Christ, so that the child is surrounded by the life of the Church, an environment which touches him most closely in the life of his parents. The parents are in a special relationship to the child, not only as physical parents, but as that part of the Church which most naturally fulfils the obligation of the whole Church to the baby.

But what difference does it make at the time? Or until the child is capable of faith? The answer is surely that we cannot say when a child's spiritual life begins. I remember A. J. Tait of Ridley, in a talk which settled a number of my own doubts about baptism, saying, "No one can tell what God may do through an infant personality." Calvin replied to those who asked how an infant, incapable of hearing the Word, could have faith, that we must not limit the powers of God, Who works in ways we cannot perceive or understand, and Who, to those incapable of hearing the Word, can give His grace otherwise.

Moreover, as the Westminster Confession says: "The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered." Surely, then, the faith which appropriates the grace offered in the sacrament includes the faith by which all his life long he looks back to his baptism. Why assume that faith must come first, or simultaneously? What happens in a Baptist Church where a person is baptized as an adult and then is later converted? I have tried to get an answer to that question, and have been told that it couldn't happen because an adult is only baptized on confession of faith. But is confession always the same as conversion? Calvin rightly maintains that infants are baptized into *future* repentance and faith, the seeds of which are implanted in their hearts by the Holy Spirit; and that, according to New Testament teaching, the thing signified need not precede the sign, but may come after.

So faith is a response to what God does for us first on Calvary and then in our baptism. *God's initiative precedes our faith.* On that note I should like to end with a quotation from Bernard Manning: "In baptism the main thing is not what men do, but what God has done. It is a sign that Christ claims all men as His own, and that He has redeemed them to a new way of life. That is why we baptize children. . . . The water of baptism declares that they are already entitled to all God's mercies to men in the passion of Christ. Your own baptism ought then to mean much to you. It ought to mean all the more because it happened before you knew, or could know, anything about it. Christ redeemed you on the first Good Friday without any thought or action on your part. It is right, therefore, that as He acted in the first instance, without waiting for any sign of faith from you, so baptism, the sign of the benefits of His Kingdom, should come to you without waiting for any faith or desire on your part. Every time we baptize a child, we declare to the whole world, in the most solemn manner, that God does for us what He does without our merits and even without our knowledge. In baptism, more plainly perhaps than anywhere else, God commends His love toward us in that *while we were yet sinners* Christ died for us."

We evangelicals need never be afraid of placing too much emphasis on baptism or the Lord's Supper, for they are sacraments of the

Gospel. Perhaps our greatest need is to recover the glory of the "givenness" of the Gospel as witnessed to in Holy Baptism. We must teach and nourish from infancy those to whom we have administered the rite of initiation. So shall we avoid the perils of a non-evangelical religion of "experience", and build on the solid rock of the saving acts of God.

Warns on Baptism

BY THE REV. W. C. G. PROCTOR, M.A., B.D.

JOHANNES WARNS (1874-1937), an accredited teacher among the Brethren in Germany, wrote a book, now translated into English¹, which every Anglican Evangelical ought to read. I do not think it will convert him to the Baptist position, but it will give him an understanding of their point of view which is hardly derivable from any other source because of the wide knowledge of Church history possessed by the present author. And, once again, one can pay tribute to a pleasantly-phrased, and extremely clear, translation by G. H. Lang.

The author goes through the New Testament and early Christian history (to the end of the second century), and finds no reference to infant baptism. From the third century he finds what he regards as "magical" notions being associated with baptism, notions which open the way for the application of baptism to unconscious infants. With the conversion of Constantine and the close alliance between Church and State engendered thereby, he finds an irresistible influence upon the Church to baptize all members of the State, the Church, in his opinion, being an agent of the State to bring its members under a central control. This virtual subordination of Church to State, though broken by the Reformers' doctrine, reappeared in an even worse form in the Lutheran State Churches; and the practice of infant baptism amongst Protestants (whose basic principles are thereby outraged), was retained, leading to the secession of the anabaptists from the Protestant block, and indeed their persecution by Protestants, a persecution as bitter as any experienced by earlier Church movements, such as that of the Donatists. With this historical review in mind, he appeals to all whose consciences are moved by the Holy Ghost, to adopt the baptist point of view, and be rebaptized as believers. The author also gives a full treatment to the question of the manner of baptism in the New Testament and in early Church times, and holds that it was by total immersion.

In spite of this strong, and scholarly, and charitably-written treatise (for it deserves this classification), the present reviewer is not convinced for the following reasons:

1. The basic question is: What is the significance of baptism? Full of information as this book is, only one sentence seems to deal

¹ *Baptism*, by Johannes Warns. Tr. G. H. Lang, Paternoster Press, pp. 352, 15/-.